The Essence of American Drama: The Short Plays of William Inge

by Dr. Howard R. Wolf

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THE SHORT PLAYS OF WILLIAM INGE

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PREFACE (all references are to *ELEVEN SHORT PLAYS.*

Dramatist's Playwright's Service Inc. New York, 1962)

In Inge's short play, *The Strains of Triumph* (one of the plays written between 1949 and 1955), the character of the Old Man, a professor (a dreamy, literary, and often alcoholic type who reappears in Inge's work), says: "No one ever recognizes a professor" (23, 135). I suspect that Inge is speaking through this character about the role of the writer in American society, but since he had been a teacher in his early years, he knew about both roles (as I do), so I have to beg your indulgence – it will be a short paper with a long handout.

1.

William Inge is a "modern" writer, but not a "modernist." Whether he is an American dramatist who can regain the stature he had in the 1950's and speak to a large "contemporary" American audience will be determined, I think, over the course of this decade. There are signs – beyond the fact of this Festival and its dynamic existence and its 2012 concert staging of his "lost play," *Off the Main Stage* – that this rehabilitation, so to speak is taking place.

There is some evidence that his plays can transcend the limits and confines of typical 1950's "family drama," that he was not merely a playwright for one Generation, but one who is "alive still" so long as "we have wits to read and praise to give" (Ben Jonson, "To The Memory Of My Beloved, The Author, Master William Shakespeare").

Just now, for instance, there is a production of "Come Back, Little Sheba," in my home-port, Buffalo, New York; and during the 2012 season, the distinguished Shaw

Festival (Niagara on the Lake, Ontario" will mount a production, again, of *Come Back, Little Sheba*, in which Inge's play will take it place among eight productions with Noel Coward, Ibsen, and Shaw, among others. Not bad company, but this resurgence of, and interest in, Inge's work (at least in my corner of North America) doesn't make it clear what future place his work will have in the Pantheon of American Theater – where we will find the busts of Albee, Miller, O'Neill, Wilder, Williams, and possibly a few others: Bernstein? Odets? Saroyan? Shepard? Sondheim?

My goal today is to identify some of the "essential" features of Inge's work as they are represented in his early short plays and to suggest that these are the "elements" that will determine in the long run if William Inge's work will overcome the stigma of "neglect" -- for it may be the case that his work is, in fact, produced more widely and significantly that the press would indicate.

To wit: a recent review in a Buffalo newspaper, *Artvoice*, begins: "This production of William Inge's 1950 play, *Come Back, Little Sheba* allows Buffalo to participate in the national rediscovery of one of the nations great neglected playwrights" (Anthony Chase, "Come Back, Little Sheba at the New Phoenix Theatre, March 29-April 4, 2012, 16).

Part of the problem is that Inge isn't a Modernist or Experimentalist and for this reason "may" seem dated, so my first task here is to say something briefly about Modernism and how its terms run counter to the main thrust of Inge's dramatic work. In his monumental *Modern Times, Modern Places*, the British social historian Peter Conrad says (151):

"How," as Tristan Tzara demanded in his 1918 manifesto,

"can anyone hope to order the chaos which constitutes that infinite, formless variation – man?" (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1999)

And T. S. Eliot, to whom we always turn when we discuss literary modernity, says (175-178) about Joyce's method in *Ulysses* (in a short, but brilliant, essay – "Ulysses, Order, and Myth" (1923):

> It is simply a way of controlling, or ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history (*Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot,* ed. Frank Kermode. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux: New York, 1975).

If I may – and who's to stop me? -- let me quote myself (*The Virginia Quarterly,* Summer 1987: "Television, Theory, and the Avant-Garde," 469-478):

> The late Modernists – whether Structuralisms or post-Structuralists— agree, in effect, that we have passed beyond a literature of reference (to God and/or the observable world) through allusion and irony (the strategies of 1920's modernism) to one of codes and the manipulation (processing) of information *with* (Structuralist) or *without* (Deconstructionist) meaning.

2. **P**ossibilities

Inge is not interested – as dramatic material – in "chaos," "anarchy," or a world (observable or symbolic) "without meaning, or language as a self-contained system (late Joyce). Like Freud, whose theories and practice of Psychoanalysis had meaning for him as an artist and person, he is interested in the "explorations of characters," as he says his brief Preface to *Eleven Short Plays,* my text for today's talk.

Inge was not interested in Camusian notions of the Absurd or the Theatre of the Absurd (Beckett, Genet, Ionesco, Pinter, Sartre, et al.) even as, like Camus, he opposed intellectual "abstraction" (Gopnik, "Facing History," *The New Yorker*, April 9, 2012, 70-76). If anything, he parodies Beckett (Endgame) Existentialism in his failed play (twenty-one performances) – *Where's Daddy?* (Voss, 226-230).

His characters pursue their dreams and longings in social and familial contexts in which these aspirations have been previously denied and defeated. His characters are not searching for an author, as in Pirandello's famous play, to give them existence, but to other characters – who define **convention** – to accept them.

Where Albee purges the fantasy of the "child" in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and Biff pleads with Willy to "burn the phony dream" in *Death of a Salesmen* in moments of something like tragic clarification and purification, Inge's characters continue to have hope and hop on the next bus with a residue of romantic optimism – on Jackie's part, for instance, in *Bus Riley's Back IN Town*: "Bus…I'll go with you" (94).

The Salesman, who is a choric figure of sorts, puts the action in perspective and saves it from sentimentality (up to a point): "Ya know, it always depresses me, kinda, to come back to this town now" (92).

That "kinda" is important and central – despite its five and dime simplicity – and reveals Inge's hesitation to give up entirely on the possibility of "return" and "rebirth" as these mythic patterns are defined in the context of Inge's small town settings.

In *PEOPLE IN THE WIND* (a forerunner of *BUS STOP*), a cowboy-rancher (24) tries to woo a wannabe artist/singer (21 on "the last stop on the Greyhound Line from Kansas City to Wichita" (16) in a "dingy establishment" (16) where "dreamy dance music" (16) competes, so to speak with the "wind" (20).

They are, at one level, an improbable pair to hook up: he's "rugged" (20) and she has aspirations for a Hollywood screen test (18). At another level, they have something deeply in common: they are both alone and looking for acceptance. This bus stop may be the last stop for them unless they *connect*, and they do – "Wait a minute," the girl says, I'm coming. Just a minute" (26).

She'll go with him to a ranch he finally has been able to buy after a life of hard work 24). A ranch in the West is a symbol of escape and harmony in American Literature: *Of Mice and Men*; *Catcher in the Rye*. It is rarely reached. Their meeting and the union they form – as temporary as it may be – is a structural feature for Inge and in American Literature and one to which I'll return in the last section of this "paper."

Inge dampens, if not destroys, the dream through the part of the drunken "college professor "(23) who -- though he studied with Kittredge and earned a Ph.D. in English Literature from Harvard – will remain on the road "with no destination" (26). "I'll spend the rest of my life riding on buses," he says (26). Lest we get caught up on the positive side or cast down in despair, the play ends with ordinary life going on: "Tomorrow we gotta order cheese (26).

3. **B**asic and Essential elements

These early short plays, written in 1949 and the early 1950's, which might be thought of as the "atoms" of Inge's longer work, deal, as he says in a preface to *The Mall*, "with the most basic human needs" (109). These "basic human needs" are revealed through: "fantasies" (109); the desperate need for erotic and romantic intimacy in *The Boy In The Basement* (48) and *AN INCIDENT AT THE STANDISH ARMS* 127) where sex is often an antidote for loneliness as it is more complexly, if not more effectively, in the plays of Tennessee Williams; ordinary social settings – "The Fiesta Room of the Hotel Boomerang in a small town in middle Texas (79) where *Bus Riley's Back In Town* takes place; and even – perhaps especially – the "PROPERTY PLOT."

Inge's theatrical spaces tend to be bare and spare. In *THE RAINY AFTERNOON*, there are: "Nail kegs, barrels, tool chests, 2 dolls, 2 glasses" (107). In *THE STRAINS OF TRIUMPH*, there is only a "Cane" (142).

Although I have said that Inge isn't a Modernist, he is not out of touch with the "streamlining" tendencies and preferences of post-WWI culture. One could apply Mies Van Der Rohe's dictum to Inge's stage: "Less is More." One might think of the lines of a Brancusi sculpture, if one remembered to apply those lines to the subject matter of an Edward Hopper painting of a nearly empty dinner or the Reginald Marsh's sketches of sailors looking for a good time at Coney Island.

One might reverse the equation and say – without being at all patronizing -- and say that his plays, as adumbrated in the early work are not alien to the atmosphere of Norman Rockwell's illustrations – if, and this is crucial, one adds "elements" of loneliness, sadness, transgressive sexuality, illusion, and delusion.

Inge manages – and this may be one of his greatest strengths – to place "basic needs" and neurosis in the "barn" (99) and "corner restaurant" (16) of American life. Often enough, it is the very contradictions of basic needs and the constraints of everyday life which led to versions of hysteria – the "maniac bum" of *THE MALL* (119). This contradiction is caught in an amusing Peter Arno cartoon of Nov. 27, 1948 in which two Puritan flirts steal a kiss in the twilight even as they are jointly manacled in a stock (**illus.**).

In a sense, many of Inge's plays – as foreshadowed in these early playlets – dramatize the conflicts of Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* writ small. For Inge, it's small town America (always, I think, of the Independence, Kansas, that he knew) and its conflicted longings in the period between World War I and World War II that he has in mind.

{{For Inge, primitive longings, biological needs, and attractions to physical beauty (43, 53) lie below the surface of ordinary small town life and can rise to he surface, like the Kraken, under certain conditions – especially when a character feels lonely or defeated and needs affirmation of his existence**. (For a discussion of the problem of the "body" in American culture, see *The Live Creature*: *Art Efron: Reader, Critic,***

***Teacher, Friend*. Paunch 69-70: Buffalo, 1999).**

Forbidden sexuality – same sex or heterosexual -- lies at the center of Inge's work. Inge's characters long to fit into their social surroundings. At the same time, the mores of these environments – small town values of the period between the wars – oppress these individuals. This dramatic tension – expressing taboo "individual"

needs and being having a place in collective life – lies at the heart of Inge's work (see Ian Burama, "Tony Judt: The Right Questions, *The New York Review*, April 5, 2012, 28-31).

Like Somerset Maugham, he was able to make use of his own sense of himself as "outsider" to identity with others who were "outside" for other reasons (see my "The Matter of Somerset Maugham: A World with Properties," *Aspects of Contemporary World Culture*, Ed. P. B. Reddy. Atlantic: New Delhi, 2008: 18-28). Like other "minority" writers (African-American, Jewish-American), Inge uses his own marginality to see deeply into the "desperation" (Thoreau) of the general culture.

Because these characters are often unselfconscious in Inge's play and tend not to be aware of their "inner" conflicts, needs and passions can emerge suddenly, even hysterically, and overcome the character and those around him (generally him, not her). Inge's plays call for brilliant actors who can embody these conflicts in their physical being and gestures, so that, when there is an "irruption," it seems consistent with the actor's character.

This is a crucial point. The complexity of Inge's apparently "simple" characters is usually latent and needs to be brought to the surface through **body language** and rhythms of speech. Ben Siegel makes this point in a review of "Come Back, Little Sheba" ("Hard Times," Gusto/*The Buffalo News*, April 16-13, 13, p. 13): The actress who plays Lola

"doesn't confuse mundane action with mundane acting."

I would prefer the word "ordinary" or "common," but the reviewer's insight is useful. Actors in Inge plays can't count on the language – as in Williams – to express "who they are."

4. **C**onnection

The theme of "outsiders" and social opposites– the rejected, defeated, and refused – coming together and form a new union, however temporary (a momentary stay against – not Frost's "chaos" but – aloneness), is, I believe, a central theme in American Literature (see my unpublished

Monograph, "Self-Reference in American Literature: From the Settlement to the Present," especially p. 43, in Howard R. Wolf '58 Papers, Special Collections, Amherst College Library).

Many such pairs appear in American Literature: Walt Whitman reaching out to his readers in *Leaves of* Grass; Emily Dickinson's "This is my letter to the World" (441) Lenny and George in *Of Mice and Men*; Alice Hindman in Sherwood Anderson's "Adventure" (*Winesburg, Ohio*); The Lone Ranger and Tonto (?), and many others.

One of those other pairs is Ben and the Old Man (the professor, again) in *The Strains of Triumph*, the most revealing, I think, of the early short plays where two long speeches (one quoted in Ralph Voss's important critical biography. *A Life of William Inge*) summarize some essential themes and aspects of Inge's "philosophy," as philosophy is understood by the common man.

In this playlet, a "lonely" professor and a desperate, rejected lover, Ben, form a bond at the end – "Come and watch. Here beside me." (140) – which is opposes and balances the romantic and Brontean union of Tom and Ann (which union has caused Ben's anguish): "Tom: We're as one person already. Aren't we?" (134).

The Professor tries to rescue Tom by pointing out the Wordsworth consolations of "observation on earth" (136) and "perspective" (141), as though life could be viewed as a "painting" (141) from a "distance" on a "lonely hillside" (141).

Loneliness creates the possibility of distance; and distance creates the possibility of aesthetic vision, a distance which Inge and his characters can sustain only for some wistful and lyrical moments before their separateness – in both positions – asserts itself.

Pictorial space is important in Inge – especially the arrangement of groups of people – because the *social environment* is a dramatic force which imposes itself upon characters and against which they rebel. Bar-rooms, bus-stops, town parks – these are places where outsiders can come together – an element of "high" comedy -- and where they can be made to feel like outsiders.

Ben is convinced and says at the curtain: "Yes. Even here, it's beautiful and exciting (141)." So triumphant is the conclusion that a distant band – playing at the Housman-like games from which Ben has excluded himself out of despair – "Boola Boola" (*Shropshire Lad*, 1936, posthumous publication).

Yale graduates may be gladdened by the conclusion of *The Strains of Triumph*, but, in end, Inge himself couldn't bear the strain. His major plays take a more complicated look at the relation between "strain" and "triumph" (about which I've said something in my previous papers presented at the Festival – 2010, 2011).

But Inge couldn't achieve the "aesthetic distance" that, say, Henry James or Chekhov do in their very different kinds of art. James came to terms with life on an aesthetic basis (see my unpublished 1967 The University of Michigan dissertation: *Forms of Abandonment in Henry James* from which two chapters were published; the

dissertation is included in the Howard R. Wolf ’58 archive of Special Collections, Amherst College Library); and Chekhov had a firm belief in the “higher aims of life and our own human dignity” (“The Lady with the Pet Dog,” *The Art of the Short Story,* eds. Gioia and Gwynn, Pearson/Longman: New York, 2006: 139).

Inge’s characters can be overwhelmed by “reality” which can terrify them (136), but like the professor who becomes “sometimes becomes depressed” (136) in *The Strains of Triumph,* couldn’t penetrate the depths of his own depression, finally, and purge his demons. Great directing and acting can bring them out sufficiently through the plain, but cracked surfaces of Inge’s dramatic language, for us to infer and respond to them.

5. SEXUAL LIBERATION: 1960-2010

It’s hard to know what kinds of plays William Inge might have written and how they would have been received, had he emerged in the 1960’s, not 1950’s. If he had experienced the permissiveness atmosphere of the 1960’s and the Gay Liberation and Gender freedom movements of the past few decades – with a legal stamp of approval in many states for same-sex marriage, for example – he would have been free to add complex dimensions to characters which now are present in latent form.

If Inge would have lived into the era of Alternative Press Classified sections in newspapers such as Buffalo’s *Artvoice,* to say nothing of the chicly erotic equivalents in *The New York Review of Books,* where “Adult” preferences can be openly advertised, his life and work might have been different.

Who knows what doors might have opened for him in an era when *J.* Edgar could be a movie Albee’s (2202) *Goat, The, or Who is Sylvia?* a theatrical possibility?

Had he been aware of a column in my university's student newspaper – "Let's Talk About Sex, Baby" – he might have concluded that "suppression" was better than "expression" (UB *Spectrum,* April 4, 2011).

At one level, he might have been appalled by the failure of taste – given the aesthetic and moral values of Pinky ("Pinko"?) in *Where's Daddy?;* at the same time, he might not have felt compelled to defend, as a form of camouflage for his private life, many obsolete standards and conventions which had so oppressed him and continued to do after the commercial failure (twenty-one performances) of *Where's Daddy?* Inge was conflicted: he was a small-town person in many ways (he hated New York City) with worldly values.

His characters would have been able – figuratively and literally – to come out of the "closet" (63) in a humane way, and a character such as Mr. Newbold in *The Tiny Closet* would not have been regarded as a reader of "dangerous books" (62), "Communist" (61), and and "freak" (64) for making and wearing "hats" (63). He could have become "newly bold," so to speak, instead of "shattered" (65).*****

Inge would have been able to open up the "cracked surfaces" and let the depths come into the light. As it is, darkness and shadows cast their pall in the corners and at the tops of stairways in Inge's work (Voss 145) – the "dark hallway" (7) in *Where's Daddy?* (a two-act play).

Instead of darkness overcoming light, light might have had a chance to triumph, as it does momentarily, in some of Inge's plays.

Whether his work would have benefited is another matter – since it's sometimes, if not, the case that repression can be useful to a writer: such as some Eastern European

samizdat writers whose every anti-regime word became important because they were forbidden. Orwell imagines this perversely creative situation in his *1984*.

CONNECTIVITY

But there is another sense in which Inge's plays are quite contemporary. The world-wide rage for "connection" via Apps, Blogs, Facebook, Internet, Smartphones, Texting, and YouTube (etc. et al.) reveals a need for interpersonal and intrapersonal (search engines) communication that far exceeds anything E.M. Forster might have imagined or meant by "*connect* (sic) the prose in us with the passion" (Ch. 22, *Howard's End*).

It turns out that few people have enough "friends." They want to be aware of their presence and even to see their faces when they are away from them (see the recent acquisition of Instagram by Facebook, *NYT*, April 10, 2012, A1, A3).

{{ As campers at Camp Leonard, Kent, Ct in the late 1940's, we sang a song at camp-fires – "friends, friends, friends, we shall always be" --knowing that our "friendships" would be bathed in remembrance and nostalgia in the fullness of time. We would remember one another faces as they would be preserved in time. Would we have wanted to stream photos of ourselves via Instagram?**}}**

If my generation – and Inge's somewhat earlier one (including his audience) – thought that their Buberesque and psychoanalytic need for an I-Thou encounter had been superceeded by certain Postmodern tendencies to reduce the value of the individual or that the popular media (especially TV) had trivialized such intimate encounters, it turns out that the need for "togetherness" (in positive and negative terms) never disappeared.

We are now on the same page with this aspect of the human experience, even if the page has disappeared. An almost Medieval version of scholarship has been revived by new possibilities for the retrieval of information (Google, Wikipedia, etc.) – a kind of neo-Reformation in which each "user' becomes a potential scholar, if not priest.

Each of us now can talk to others in an "old way" with new technology. Miniature technology makes intimacy possible again. But is this new technology so different, really, from the function of this 1825 edition of the *Poetical Works of Lord Byron* (**exhibit**)?

William Inge's work may "come back" somewhat in this new era ; and there are signs that this is happily happening. Teena's line in *Where's Daddy* (1966) – "I don't seem to have any connection with them" – may prompt a new audience to call their inner Verizon in order to expand their horizons (pace). (BTW: Barbara Dana played the role of Teena in the original production).

If users of the new social media come to realize that contemporary Technology may make them feel less "lonely", but no less "alone,"

the plays of Inge may become newly important as expressions, however thwarted, of the need for "real" contact – up close and personal (Nathan Keller, *The New Yorker*, "The Disconnect," April 16, 2012, 80-83).

HRW: April 10, 2012

***** See my 1961 USIA File (in The Amherst College collection) in which I was rejected for the Foreign Service probably as a matter of "red-baiting" for signing some

petitions as a teenager (possibly "Committee for World Youth and Cultural Exchange." Rep. Alan West recently claimed that there were "75 Communist House Democrats" (Donna Cassata, *The Buffalo New*, April 12, 2012, A4).

ECHOES OF OTHER WRITERS

Complete works production: chronology